

## Liminal lives: Plight of widows of farmers in India

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### ABSTRACT:

India in the global platform is known for its agrarian nature. Even after development reaching its' peak in various employment sectors, around 60-65% of the population depend on agriculture and its produces either directly or indirectly. From the time of India's Independence, the role of farmer's and their contribution have been asserted with respect to the motherland. The late Prime Minister of India, Lal Bahadur Shastri gave the slogan "Jai Jawan? Jai Kisan!" motivating the soldiers on the battlefield and the farmers for producing grains in their fields. With the introduction of India's New Economic Policy in 1991 that boosted India's economy, the agricultural sector in terms of domestic produce and domestic occupation felt the brunt of the policy. With heavy competition to sell the products in the market, the farmer's in India have resorted to money lenders for money to buy crops, fertilizers etc. The seasonal rainfall, expensive machinery further worsens the situations for the farmer. Due to lack of resources and interventions from the government on one hand and family responsibilities on the other hand, the farmers in India have resorted to ending their lives by drinking fertilizers or by hanging. The responsibilities of the family and the pressure of the money lenders pass on to the wives of the famers. This paper aims to analyse the societal panorama through the lens of the struggle faced by the wives and children of farmers and the government's approach towards this ongoing survival game.

**(KEYWORDS: Widowhood, farmer's suicide, debt, empathy, insubordination)**

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### I. INTRODUCTION

In India, the soil is considered to be the greatest employer giving a country of billion the joy of livelihood. India is known for its agrarian economy where agriculture and farming constitute the main source of earning for the majority of the population of the country. During this phase that requires constant support from the government and private players, the agricultural occupations is neglected both qualitatively and quantitatively by the government and giant conglomerates giving prior and much preference to Industrial sectors of the country. Post 1991, when India adopted the New Economic Policy the approach welcomed foreign investors to invest in the country. This allowed the companies to become rulers of the market pushing the traditional industries in the back seat. Apart from the politics of the government, other reasons such as environment and economic issues play a vital role in the growth of the agricultural sector(Mishra, 2006). Natural conditions such as unpredictable rainfall or changing weather hamper the natural growth of crops. Simultaneously the nexus between the retail stores and the middlemen make it difficult for the farmers to directly earn the profits from their produce. India, known as an agrarian country owes its identity to the sons of soil is currently facing an ethical dilemma of ignoring the plight of the farmers. The global competition and constant greed of multinational corporations have pushed the farmers to a hand to mouth survival. With a hopeless insight in life, the famers resort to suicide as one of the tragic yet viable solution to their crisis. It has to be understood that suicide is not a sudden event but an outcome of accumulated stress. Years of stress and consistent frustration to survive pushes a person to the brim of hopelessness and the only viable solution that confronts is that of death. Due to circumstances, one feels increasingly depressed and fails to see hope and meaning in life. The act of suicide, or the phenomenon of suicides on a widespread basis, is usually provoked by a churn in socio-economic conditions. Individuals and communities are under pressure cope with the changes in the conditions of their lives, when society is in a state of flux. Once it is accepted that growing number of suicides within a community is provoked sudden or dramatic changes in the terms on which they are lived, it is necessary to explore what these changes are how they have impacted the lives of the community, in this case, the peasant. The aftermath of the incident relies on the lives of the widows and the children of the farmer who have to survive in shame and misery.

### **Death of survival:**

Increasing occurrence of farmer suicides in various parts of the country complemented with media coverage has adversely affected the quality of life of the farmers and their dependents. The impact of the loss of life has negative social, economic and psychological consequence on the victim's family. Eventually, the victim's family members adopt several measures to cope with the loss and to mitigate the negative impacts over a period of time. In suicide-prone states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala and Maharashtra, the government's response to the crisis of farmer suicide has mostly been simplistic and in some cases perhaps aggravating (Manjunatha A.V, 2017). The main problem with offering 'special packages' as compensation for the loss of life is more reactionary than pre-emptive long term policy. Suicides are characterized by a prior history of difficulties and in most cases also mental illness that renders the person vulnerable to suicidal behavior. There has been persistent politicisation of the statistics with respect to the number of deaths that has blurred the reality of the situation, especially for women farmers and for farmer widows (Kota, 2018). One of the biggest hurdles for the women to get on with their lives is the outstanding debts left behind by the deceased farmer. Part of this is due to the impoverished and marginalized status of these women, partly it is because they belong to the largely ignored unorganised sector and partly because dominating nature of the deceased husband's family, or illiterate, or ignorant or uneducated. Interaction with the state as a male domain posed a deterrence against any assertion and contest by the widows of the farmers. The mediation with the outside world through the male member of the family deeply influenced the decisions of not just widows but women at different ages, and reflected in their condition socially and economically. Disputes against the late husband's family, therefore, had a low possibility of being initiated by the widow, as she would still need the cooperation and mediation of his family members (Assadi, 2011). The need for an inclusive argument against the invisibility conferred by the state on the woman, whose conditional visibility as a wife is lost with the death of her husband. Post the loss of her husband a widow's contribution to the household remains unaccounted as well as her role in moulding the future of her children. The value of a widow's labour or her children who are of age to work provides a visibility that was incompatible with her invisible universe of ignorance and sympathy. The widow has to be represented indirectly through the life of her children or the opinion of her family but not directly through her work, even if she carries on with the same farm work in the farmlands to pay off the debts. The earnings of the widow remain invisible as her efforts to earn and feed her family remains in the shadow with any acknowledgement

### **Liminal lives; liminal voices**

The connection of the farmer suicides and distress among the farmer's wives in the aftermath depends on the struggle for livelihood and survival. The survival of those who at one time were dependent lies on the material and non-material values in life. These values have a direct impact on the perception, behaviour and survival mechanisms in life. Material values refer to source of income, social and economic security whereas non-material values refer to emotional support. Women, who form the backbone of Indian agriculture, may be particularly vulnerable to corporate exploitation. According to Oxfam India, 85% of rural women work in agriculture, but only around 13% own any land (Bhowmick, 2019).

According to a study conducted by the Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research, Mumbai, the major reasons for farmers' suicides are huge debt, crop failure due to faulty rainfall and low return, illness of family members, failure to arrange marriage of daughters and a lack of alternative sources of income (Behere PB, 2009). In addition to economic reasons natural calamities are also responsible for farmer's suicides. The effective agricultural production is mostly depends on favorable weather condition. Due to the global warming, deforestation and other manmade reasons natural condition has become more worsen and reasons like heavy raining, floods, droughts, delay in raining, heavy cyclones, and manmade reason like reduction in subsidies, fire, accidents and so on, farmers are not able to take qualitative and quantitative production from their farm. Even all the condition are in favor of farmers and production is good in quality & quantity farmers don't get proper return of their product in the market, as more supply of goods reduces demand and reduction in demands automatically reduces price of the same. Due to these reasons agriculture becomes an assured loss making business. But the marginal & small farmers of India don't have another option for earning. And they again & again put their all efforts in the agriculture. Furthermore, faulty government policies related to market prices, exploitation by private money lenders and its ultimate health consequence was frustration leading to increasing number of suicide among the farmers. In the absence of institutionalized finance, the farmers normally resort to borrowing from private money lenders. Significantly, the loans taken from the private moneylenders are difficult to repay due to high interest rates. Continuous losses turn them to become insolvent and frustration of the same forces them to commit suicides. The death of the farmers is thus the reflection of the breakdown of institutional safety nets, which in the past have cushioned the impact of agrarian crisis.

Due to the sudden death of farmers committing suicide, the wives and the children are faced with a number of obstacles living as widows and half orphans. At the time of an unexpected demise of the farmers due to suicide the entire responsibility of the family falls on the wives who have to struggle to bring the off track life back to normalcy (Shiva, 1999). Some of the responsibilities include nurturing and rearing of the children even with or without the support of parents at home, lack of support by their in-laws, lack of financial support, problem of marrying off their young daughters etc. In the case of debt taken from money lenders, the women have to repay the loan in order to escape shame perceived if the marriage of the daughter breaks.

Caste rigidity along with religious dogmas holds importance in the Indian society. Different honour in different Caste; higher castes are more vulnerable, especially loss of honour, therefore the reason for suicide is more common to them. No particular group can be identified as at risk group on the basis of land ownership and caste. It is however important to note that, farmers from lower caste nomadic tribe have limited resources and therefore they are able to sustain themselves for a smaller period compared with middle and rich farmers; which is likely to make them more vulnerable. Patriarchy on the other hand questions the role of women after her husband's death is she can survive on her own. Wives of farmers are socially victimized and psychologically depressed, financially helpless, physically scarred deeply with health hazards, and spiritually break into pieces. There are no spaces for women where they can express themselves, as spaces for women often get restricted and regulated by the family, community, and society.

## II. CONCLUSION

It is clear that the policies associated with the process of economic liberalization, particularly the 1990s, have impacted the lives of the peasantry in a major way. It has also imposed a stress on the peasantry, which is possibly responsible for them taking their own lives. Lack of basic infrastructural facilities like safe drinking water, inadequate health facilities, transport facilities, proper food, cloth and shelter affects the psychological and physical condition of the farmers. Sometimes they become drug addicted and drunker. All these things attracted heavy diseases and turn them to die. A one-tone straightforward causal relationship is difficult to establish. However, it is evident that the logic of New Economic Policy, fundamentally defined as allowing a greater play for market forces, whose corollary is inevitably a "withdrawal" of the state, has added a qualitatively new dimension to the stress on the peasantry. It is significant that the field of agrarian studies has suffered precisely at a time when the peasantry has been the height of its distress. There is a definite need in the change of plan that gives precedence to farmers over corporate giants. In the absence of the farmer who is the breadwinner, government initiatives should include credit system to the wife of the deceased who can earn her living and sustain in dignity. Apart from the governmental and non-governmental norms and regulations, there is a dire need to change the mentality of the society that perceives widows as outcasts and women as dependent. Only when the mindset of the society is changed and women are regarded as equal, only then can all planned initiatives reap desired outcomes. Till then, voices of the women and their children will continue to be liminal.

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